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Communication:

A Greater Analysis of Storytelling in Music Through Mayuzumi's *Bunraku*

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Intro

There is a particular feeling writers hold onto as they compose a work of fiction, nonfiction, or poetry. It is similar to the experience of listening to music before understanding the notes, and similar to the term scholar Eugene Gendlin coined as “felt sense” – the physical experience that one encounters when performing or engaging in a creative act, a “felt experience we can access and learn from, an aspect of being human, available to all. (CUNY)” As musicians learning to perform a piece of music, they are often told to “perform the story” of the work. Although many musicians may not think about the link their musical storytelling may hold to writing, the idea of the story that they perform through music is remarkably similar to the one a writer performs through words. By critically engaging with Toshiro Mayuzumi’s cello composition *Bunraku*, I defined the story conveyed through Mayuzumi’s music and tested my own interpretation through music and writing, challenging and illuminating the relationship between literary and musical storytelling.

Bunraku was chosen for its reputation and its specificity in terms of length and instrumentation. A short piece fit the time restraints for the study and also allowed a more in-depth interpretation of the piece to take place. As the expected outcome of this project is the discovery of areas where the human experience in the arts overlap, this project can benefit any researcher or student in a fine arts field. For music students, the methods used to identify the *Bunraku* story and perform it can be replicated in the practice room; for creative writers, the use of another art genre as means for inspiration can pave the way to new types of writing; and for other art students or creators, the study of *Bunraku* can exemplify an experiment in which the combination of the arts redefines the boundaries of the fine arts in general.

Context: Composer

The first step in understanding *Bunraku* was to study the background of the composer – this included examining his political beliefs as well as his typical manifestation of these beliefs in his musical composition. Toshiro Mayuzumi, born in Japan in 1929, was primarily regarded as “a fervently nationalist composer who sought a return to Japanese traditions and actively opposed Western influence and hegemony” (Cook 1). His affiliation with Japanese nationalist author Yukio Mishima fed this reputation, and led many scholars to assume that the composition *Bunraku* was first and foremost an expression of his anti-West mentality. Indeed, his 1962 symphonic poem *Samsara* did convey strong neo-nationalist messages by reminding listeners of traditional Japanese values and the violence of the Pacific influence (Utz 126). Steven Nuss also interpreted Mayuzumi’s unique musical style as a way of forcing Western instruments to assimilate and “speak Japanese” (Cook 3).

Yet further insight into his biography reveals that Mayuzumi’s expression of *Bunraku* was far more personal than his political values. Scholar Lisa M. Cook’s biography of Mayuzumi shows an upbringing and an education that display a lifelong integration of both Western and traditional Japanese music. Although he was raised with the sound of the *koto*, a traditional stringed instrument played by his mother, Mayuzumi studied music at both the National University of Fine arts in Tokyo and the Paris Conservatory of Music. Even before the expression of his nationalist political views, Mayuzumi combined his contemporary education with his traditional backgrounds: in college, his repertoire combined Western and Japanese elements, particularly in the form of film scores and electronic music in the form of *musique concrete*, which utilizes the engineering of recordings as raw sounds which are manipulated and combined to form music. After WWII and during the US occupation of Japan, Mayuzumi openly

opposed the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, and he envisioned returning the Japanese emperor to his prewar position of divine status. In 1958, he composed the *Nirvana Symphony*, which integrated the music of Buddhist temple bells and Western instrumentation. In 1960 he composed his *Mandala Symphony* and in 1962 he composed *Samsara*, both of which used his unique combination of traditional Japanese and Western musical elements to convey nationalist themes (Cook 7-8).

Mayuzumi's affiliation with Western music and traditional Japanese music also reflected his values in showing that he believed not everything from the Western influence should be rejected. In 1960, he was commissioned to write *Bunraku* for the 30th anniversary of the Ohara Museum of Art in Kurashiki, Japan – a museum founded to celebrate the work of Western-style painter Kojima Torajiro. Cook seems to imply that Mayuzumi's commission had something to do with his similarity to Torajiro himself, writing, ““Not ironically, Mayuzumi's career paralleled Torajiro's, as Mayuzumi had also studied in Europe. Like Torajiro's work, *Bunraku* is a musical representation of this cross-cultural current that is simultaneously influenced by Japan and the West” (Cook 16). Analysis of both Torajiro and Mayuzumi's work reveals the role both of them played as an ambassador of sorts between new-world Western and old-world Japanese art. As a result, context reveals that *Bunraku* did not seek to overpower Western style music but rather unite it with traditional Japanese music – it represents the “in-between” sort of space occupied by Mayuzumi and can even be seen as a new form of avant-garde music, which uses a widely popular instrument to convey music that experiments with timbre, tone quality, and raw sounds.

Context in Composition: Looking at *Bunraku*

The most visible way in which Mayuzumi's composition incorporates traditional Japanese values is in its title, *Bunraku*. Bunraku is a genre of traditional Japanese puppet theater; the performance consists of a puppet operated by three people (left arm, right arm, legs/kimono), a *shamisen* player, and a narrator, or *tayu* (Japan-Guide). The *shamisen*, a plucked instrument, plays the music while the *tayu* both narrates the story and voice acts for all of the characters. It is the *tayu*'s responsibility to give inflection and personality to each individual character.

The nature of a bunraku play is to convey larger-than-life stories, such as epic tales or bloody historical dramas, with small structural movements. Bunraku is distinctively non-Western in that the elements of the story – voice, music, and action – are all separated onstage. The stories and music are usually quoted, not improvised, but every performer must acutely listen to one another and “check” each other's performance, matching their movements, pitch, and split decisions with subtlety and precision. To some scholars, bunraku theater is a commentary on the elements of a story and how they combine, abandoning the Western expectation for unity, personage, and perfection in order to highlight the mechanics of stories and what they mean to society. Scholars Kott and Taborski note this in their research, commenting on how Western theater is often so ruled by a sense of immersion that fictional characters are projected onto the actors even after they leave the stage. This all-encompassing sense of immersion, often dubbed the “soul,” is absent from bunraku theater. Without the distraction of the “soul” in bunraku theater, “inside no longer rules outside” (Japan-Guide).

Apart from the instrumentational structure of *Bunraku*, the structure of tension in the composition also mirrors the plot of a bunraku play. Bunraku storytelling is typically broken up into three parts: *jo*, *ha*, and *kyu*, which are typically resemblant to the exposition, rising action,

and climax respectively. Draffin's analysis of *jo*, *ha*, and *kyu* shows they are recurring parts in an aesthetic present in Japanese culture as well as storytelling. Meant to mirror the familiar occurring tensions in nature and in sexual experience, the *jo*, *ha*, and *kyu* build on one another in order to fixate the audience on the impending the climax, or the most interesting part of the story. Unlike the Western diagram for plot progression, *jo*, *ha*, and *kyu* have no falling action or resolution; the *kyu* is meant to end in such a way that its closing can be interpreted as the beginning of another *jo*, through which the cycle of tensions continues (Draffin 9-145). In Cook's manuscript, the scholar asserts that Mayuzumi's composition imitates the sounds of *Bunraku* in specific ways by utilizing two different techniques to convey two distinct voices.

Context in Composition: Analysis of *Bunraku*

After absorbing the context and cultural references of Mayuzumi's *Bunraku*, I applied my knowledge of bunraku to my performance of the piece. Due to time constraints, I only played an excerpt of the first half of Mayuzumi's composition – consisting of the *jo* and the *ha* parts.

In *Bunraku*, the *jo* is separate from the rest of the composition, consisting only of the *shamisen* musical sound and a dark mood setting. This goes from measures 1 – 25. Since the *jo* of the composition was physically separate from the rest of the piece, it seemed more like the abstract at the beginning of a journal than an exposition. Thus, I interpreted it as one: I gave the *jo* section its own *jo-ha-kyu* contouring, increasing the dynamics and the harsh quality of my pizzicatos towards the middle of the section, then reaching a climax and regrouping just during the last five measures of the *jo* section. Cook's analysis of *Bunraku* also included theoretical analysis of the piece, noting its composition in the D minor scale and thus applying special attention to notes such as the dominant A and parallel major B \flat during each section. In this case,

the tonic note, D, acts as the “home” note and gives the audience a feeling of stability while the dominant, A, increases a sense of instability and inspires movement. I took this analysis into account during the *jo* section as well, using articulation and dynamic range to heighten the tension at the moments where I played the dominant A note.

Then, the *ha* begins after the exposition, and it includes a bowed *tayu* lead with *shamisen* accompaniment, introducing melodic tensions and a fluctuating, but lighter, mood. During the *ha* section, I made sure to bring out the differences between the *shamisen* and the newly introduced *tayu*, allowing the pizzicato to sound more percussive and the arco to sound smooth and legato, even through double-stopped gestures. Mayuzumi’s unique interpretation of rhythm, shown through metrical changes and the repeated use of hemiolas, enabled this interpretation. In this case, I decided not to follow Cook’s direct theoretical analysis of *Bunraku*, because frequent accidentals meant that the key in general no longer audibly led to D as a tonic note. Along with his changes in meter, Mayuzumi included a range of accidentals, and I felt accenting the leading notes on a page without clear tonality would be superfluous. Instead, my interpretation focused on what was “weird” or “outstanding” - namely, the accidentals themselves. I accented these where appropriate and made sure to keep the unusual notes audible to the audience even during quieter phrases.

After the *ha* ends, the *kyu* combines the sounds of both *shamisen* and *tayu* parts, which rush towards a chaotic finish meant to sound as if the performer can barely hold the piece together. Although I did not perform the *kyu* section of Mayuzumi’s composition, my interpretation of a hypothetical performance adhered to the traditional impressions of the *kyu* and my practical impressions of the *ha*. I would allow for greater tonal contrast between the *shamisen* and *tayu* for as long as possible, then allow them to blend together as tempo accelerates and

tension increases. I would also increase the dynamic volume, as written in the score, and increase the drama of my visible gestures to solidify the impression of the piece “falling apart.” My execution of this composition as a whole was also informed by Sol Daniel Kim and Deborah Pae’s recordings of the piece, which were available on YouTube.

Context in Composition: Transferring Melodic Ideas to Storytelling

My interpretation of the story in *Bunraku* derived from my analysis of the piece as a result of research and practice as well. When writing the story, I kept the *jo*, *ha*, and *kyu* - but not exactly in the traditional “beginning, middle, end” form. Since Mayuzumi’s *jo* section reminded me of an abstract, I began my story with a short blurb - one containing significant themes appearing in the story as a whole but able to stand alone if separated. While I stuck with Cook’s interpretation of the *shamisen* and *tayu* characters in music, I decided to separate the two sounds into two antagonistic characters during the story. This directly contrasted Cook’s interpretation of the two voices side-by-side, called *fusoku-furi*, which views the two elements as completely neutral and neither connected nor separate. Separating the elements into two separate characters, though, further honored the bunraku tradition of isolating each element of a story. It also allowed me to increase the written tension in the story as the musical tension intensified, engaging the two separate characters in conflict with one another as the story progressed into the *kyu*.

Regarding to tactile interpretations, my impression of the piece as I practiced the first two pages filled in the blanks of my story. When practicing the *Bartok pizzicato* (more often known as snap pizzicato or snapped plucking), my center of gravity and small stature forced me to lean forward and invest significant energy into the gesture, especially during the *jo* section where the gesture is most frequent. As a result, my performance of the *shamisen* voicing was dynamic and

almost unstable, whereas *shamisen* performance during a bunraku play would have to be steady and reliable for the other performers. This unique interpretation allowed me to use the written composition to branch out from traditional conventions of bunraku, giving contour even to what would normally be considered “background music,” and allowing a more balanced focus between the *shamisen* and *tayu*. I noticed similar aspects in Deborah Pae’s performance of *Bunraku*. Tactile impressions also inspired my interpretation of the *ha*. I deliberately contrasted the articulation of the sudden and harsh *shamisen* with the fluid and gradual legato of the *tayu*, rather than blending them together as either “harsh” or “smooth.” Both elements are supposed to combine, but the *shamisen* during this section appeared less forceful than the *tayu*, and it also generally required less concentration for the performer. As a result, I interpreted the *shamisen* in the *ha* section as meant to accentuate or accompany the character of the *tayu*, rather than functioning as a separate entity entirely. This secondary nature of the *shamisen*, which performed solo during the *ha* section, distinguishes the timbre and tonal quality of the *ha* section as the audience approaches it.

When deciding upon the plot of the short story, I imitated Cook’s interpretation of *Bunraku* as a representation of the intersection of two different cultures in Mayuzumi’s life. Just like *Bunraku* combined traditional Japanese values in performance with Western instrumentation, the creation of a short story based on *Bunraku* combined a Western education in music and writing with a newfound education in Japanese music and writing. As I negotiated the synthesis of these backgrounds, I decided to start with my existing knowledge about Japanese storytelling as it was before I began researching *Bunraku: the haiku*. In fact, the *haiku* was the only form of Japanese literature with which I was familiar at the time, and my understanding of it included both the syllabic form of the poem itself and its traditional theme in nature. Therefore,

my short story included Western elements in the format and prose of the short story, *haiku* elements in the focus of the narrative on nature and myths behind natural events, and *bunraku* storytelling elements in the *jo, ha, kyu* format. My goal in the story itself was to showcase it as a hybrid of an ever-expanding cultural awareness, as the writer herself is a student who is always in a position to learn more about intercultural communication, awareness, and appreciation.

The next level of my interpretation of *Bunraku* relied on Gendlin's "felt sense." What I understood about the process of writing at the time was that my inspiration for a story started as a feeling – or something like "felt sense" – and could then be interpreted into words that formed a story. Due to this, I expected the process of writing something based off a musical composition to be a relatively similar experience. I could interpret an original feeling based on the music and then translate that feeling into words in much the same way as I could with pieces that developed straight from ideas into writing. I expected this to lead the researcher directly into a specific conclusion as well: one that determined a single "felt sense," or emotional reaction, from every kind of art. It would prove the intrinsic connection between the fine arts and explicitly open an avenue for combining them with relatively simple methods.

Yet the process was instead much more recursive than merely two-step, requiring meticulous negotiation between the musical ideas in my head and the written ideas on the paper. In my experience, I first had to listen to the composition and develop a stable interpretation of my own inspiration from it – thus nailing down the first "felt sense" or internal reaction from the music. Then, I had to write some form of prose that I felt matched that feeling, then excavate a "felt sense" from the words that I wrote and make sure that it sang the same tune as the original "felt sense" from the musical piece. In other words, I had to create and then match two different kinds of "felt sense" at once while also translating those feelings into communicable words. This

led to several drafts of the writing, requiring me to take one musical feeling and create a story based on it, then scrap each part of the finished story that didn't align with nuances I felt on the musical composition before restarting the process. During the course of the project, five drafts of the *Bunraku* short story were completed. My study of *Bunraku*, though, did reveal that the boundary between storytelling and music is malleable – the arts can be transformed and interpreted in a variety of new ways, even if they cannot necessarily be combined. This study also revealed that the process of storytelling benefits from all five senses. Informing the short story with tactile impressions from practicing *Bunraku* as well as auditory impressions allowed me to create a broader tonal atmosphere in the writing.

Conclusion: What now?

There are several limitations to this project that can open the door for further research. The project in question only included one performer, one story, and one page of music. It was also performed by means of solitary recording. The researcher in question was also on a time limit, meaning that the given more time the story could have been revised more precisely to fit the nuances of the *Bunraku* composition in even more places throughout the story. A more expansive study could lead to a work of fiction that examines tonal words and the effect they have on a reader, or one that experiments with rhythmic structure within a piece of prose in order to imply a certain musical inclination.

There are also several directions in which further projects could expand specific aspects of the *Bunraku* study. For example, the impact of various mediums in performance could be further examined by surveying audience reactions. A project such as this could be performed, and an audience's impressions could be determined by means of a survey at the event to

determine whether the presence of more fine arts genres in a performance is received as more of less engaging than a one-genre performance. The boundary between various fine arts could also be expanded in study by organizing a multi-part study that examines more than two types of art in connection to one another. A researcher could interview, shadow, and work closely with artists who integrate more than two types of art in their daily lives, specifically researching whether the artist in question has developed unique skills as a result of interdisciplinary study or if their products are unique in any certain way. Lastly, the specific method of creating writing as stories based on music could be studied in order to narrow down strategies and track commonalities between work. Writers who practice these combined forms of writing could develop an adeptness at translating between “felt senses,” or their work could emerge as distinctly dissimilar to typical short stories published by similar authors. Projects such as these could function as commentaries on the nuances included in writing and the ways in which writers and composers alike must take into account the rhetorical situation of their work.

The goal of this project was to examine and test the ways in which music and storytelling come together, specifically in the context of the *Bunraku* cello solo. The results of the study prove that a well-rounded understanding of a piece – including the context, composer intentions, tactile impressions and technical practice, and personal interpretation – can significantly benefit any individuals who come into contact with a certain piece of art. Not only does the storyteller achieve more dimensional plot and more striking atmosphere, but the performer can amplify their musicality and the audience can heighten their awareness of the art they witness as well as their engagement into the story. This study outlined extensive methods by which one of these individuals can learn about their piece and interpret a story. Finally, it proved that the fine arts do all work in terms of “felt sense,” but that the specific emotional impression of any art relies not

just on the art in question but the genre of art it belongs to as well. Understanding these principles allows for new ways that artists can view and interact with their art, and it opens the door for more research that may shed light on the human experience as a whole.

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